A Trumpian Mechanism

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Abstract:
In 2016, a liar made a hypocrite appear worse and thereby won the US presidency. How did a liar, which is traditionally deemed something worse than a hypocrite, manage to do this? This article offers an answer. It does so by uncovering a peculiar mechanism, a Trumpian mechanism, at the heart of Trump's relations with his critics. The mechanism explains how Trump benefited from wrong-footing his critics and is thus essential for understanding Trump's success. The article offers a few key examples of this mechanism working against Trump's political opponents, e.g., Trump's (first) impeachment. It then shows how the mechanism also worked against Trump in regard to his handling of Covid-19. Ultimately, the mechanism helps explain both the outcome of the 2016 and the 2020 elections. The article concludes by stressing the importance of using this mechanism to better understand the Trump phenomenon. It claims that using the mechanism as a guide to understand Trump can prevent empowering the very object we, as critics, often aim to disempower.

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A Trumpian Mechanism

The 2016 presidential election was an election between a liar and a hypocrite. The hypocrite lost because the liar succeeded in making the hypocrite appear worse. Customarily, liars are deemed worse than hypocrites. Liars are usually condemned because their statements are deliberate attempts to deceive. Hypocrites, on the other hand, need not always intend to deceive. For example, a preacher who espouses the importance of living according to particular values might occasionally fall short of those values by acting contrary to his stated beliefs. As such, hypocrites are deemed better than liars because they have a sensibility to moral argument that liars do not possess. Even hypocrites who do intend to deceive, whether through suppression of disreputable actions or a pretense of concern, are deemed better than liars for this very reason—because they have an acute sense of the importance of moral standards (even if they just pay lip service to them), which is something liars seem to lack. "Lying is a much broader category than hypocrisy," Ruth Grant writes, "and they rarely require a pretense of belief in a particular principle or ethic" (30). At the very least, then, hypocrisy requires moral pretense, paying tribute to (and perhaps even strengthening) a shared set of ethical norms.[1] As William Raspberry writes, "Hypocrisy recognizes that the erosion of standards hurts everybody. It accepts the sanctity of societal standards, even while violating them. It says: What I'm doing is wrong; therefore I must not be found out."[2] Accordingly, when a hypocrite is caught acting contrary to their stated values, they either deny their deeds (e.g., Bill Clinton), publicly apologize (e.g., John Edwards), or rationalize their deeds by claiming the higher ideals toward which they aim occasionally necessitate undignified actions (e.g., Barack Obama). The latter sets itself apart from the others precisely because of its affirmation of hypocrisy. For example, Obama's hypocrisy, labeled principled compromise, has been lauded as a positive (perhaps defining) feature of American democracy. Although he acted contrary to his stated values, his actions were strategic, committed in the service of "our" highest ideals—i.e., "you can't compromise in terms of speaking, but in terms of what you do, there are pragmatic reasons and sometimes reasons of principle not to act on them" (MacFarquhar). This type of hypocrite is one whose willingness to be hypocritical is seen as their strongest characteristic. Hillary Clinton never appeared to be this type of hypocrite, yet she too could be understood as affirming the necessity of hypocrisy.

Prior to 2016, Clinton's hypocrisy was deemed critical for the power politics she embodied. She knew she was a hypocrite and knew why, and this was transparent to us as well. As David Runciman wrote in 2008, "[Hillary] is both skeptical and somewhat cynical, and therefore is bound to wear a mask; she has constructed a persona for herself in order to negotiate the world of power politics as she understands it… If she is sincere about anything, she is sincere about power" (216). As such, she was perceived as especially adept at international relations, skillful at maintaining and promoting America's central place within the political order—far better, at least, than a liar.[3] As Tyler Cowen writes, "When it comes to how the agent speaks to allies and enemies, you almost always should prefer hypocrisy to bald-faced lies. The history and practice of diplomacy show this." Although this form of hypocrisy is perhaps less appealing than principled compromise (which is one reason Obama defeated her in the 2008 primaries), you know what you are getting. Hillary might not do what she says, but she is at least limited in her hypocrisy by the respect she holds for "the abstract rules and principles that underlie the social order" (ibid). Accordingly, prior to 2016, Hillary could be trusted to affirm our basic principles while avoiding completely unacceptable words and actions: "she is less likely than more sincere politicians to be hypocritical about the things that really matter" (Runciman 216). In sum, hypocritical politicians, even those who simply have a thirst for power, understand the importance of (and perhaps even strengthen) the rules of the game; cold-blooded liars do not, which is a central reason hypocrites are deemed better than liars. How then did the hypocrite appear worse than the liar in 2016?

One reason is that the liar did not really deceive many people with his lies, nor were his lies necessarily intended to deceive. Some mainstream media outlets briefly took note of this phenomenon (without thereafter internalizing it). For example, *The Washington Post* wrote, "Many Trump supporters don't believe his wildest promises — and they don't care…They view Trump's pledges more as malleable symbols than concrete promises" (Johnson), and the *New York Times* noted, "Many don't take his promises literally—for instance, only 42 percent of Republicans believe Trump will succeed in making

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[1] As La Rochefoucauld famously wrote, "Hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue."
[2] Ruth Grant would most likely agree, as she attributes the frequency of hypocrisy in politics to "the strength of the moral impulse in public life" (14).
[3] A primary reason Obama saw her as a natural fit for Secretary of State.

Mexico pay to build a wall" (Nyhan). Yet, most of the mainstream media continued to meticulously fact check and publicize, in an apparent attempt to generate outrage, Trump's ever-accumulating lies. Noting the disconnect between the mainstream media and Trump's supporters' interpretation of his words, Salena Zito argued in *The Atlantic*, "the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally." Republican strategist, Brad Todd elaborated:

> Journalists are conditioned to believe that words are the ultimate product, to be curated, sweated, grinded and polished… But real estate developer Donald Trump's training on words is entirely different—and the press has yet to adapt to it… [The public] sees Trump's words differently than journalists do. They… see Trump not as a politician but as a businessman. They know, and even value, the fact that his words have not passed through a gauntlet of spinners, prose smoothers, and fact-checkers. They may have met other real estate professionals in their own lives and they know better than to take the words of ad hoc marketing seriously. These supporters are not giving Trump a benefit of the doubt. They recognize his professional DNA, and journalists are overdue to recognize this discernment by their own audiences.

In other words, the mainstream media was largely blind to the fact that Trump's lies were not truly deceptive. Many of his lies were, to use a phrase from the ghostwritten *The Art of the Deal,* "truthful-hyperbole," viz., intentional exaggerations meant to reveal a kernel of truth. For example, he made outlandish claims and promises, such as, "[Clinton] may be the most corrupt person ever to seek the presidency," "we are going to build a wall and Mexico is going to pay for it," unemployment is not 5.6 but "maybe even 21 percent," "[I'm] calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslim's entering the United States," etc., but most of them could be reduced to simple truths, e.g., Hillary suppresses her true intentions and past actions to protect herself and her political career, not us; we need to improve our immigration system, increase employment (especially US production jobs), and revamp our vetting protocol, etc. [4] Accordingly, Trump's lies were not understood by his supporters as attempts to intentionally deceive, but 'tell it like it is' speech that made them feel as if they were in on the lies with him.[5]

Another reason the hypocrite seemed worse than the liar was that the hypocrite appeared to deceive herself. Generally understood, self-deception involves a situation in which an individual is so motivated to believe a conception of who they are that they deny all evidence to the contrary. In such cases, what the individual is for themselves, i.e., how they perceive themselves, is in direct conflict with what they are for others, i.e., how they are perceived from an external point of view. Jean Paul Sartre's notion of bad faith is instructive here, especially his example of a man who lives in denial of his homosexuality. He writes:

> A homosexual frequently has an intolerable feeling of guilt, and his whole existence is determined in relation to this feeling. One will readily foresee that he is in bad faith. In fact it frequently happens that this man, while recognizing his homosexual inclination, while avowing each and every particular misdeed which he has committed, refuses with all his strength to consider himself '*a paederast.*' His case is always 'different,' peculiar; there enters into it something of a game, of chance, of bad luck; the mistakes are all in the past; they are explained by a certain conception of the beautiful which women cannot satisfy; we should see in them the results of a restless search, rather than the manifestations of a deeply rooted tendency, etc., etc., Here is assuredly a man in bad faith who borders on the comic since, acknowledging all the facts which are imputed to him, he refuses to draw from them the conclusion which they impose (Sartre 108).

This person is in bad faith because he denies that his past actions, his facticity, have any bearing on his open future, i.e., his transcendence. He sees himself as able to create himself anew each moment—just because he engaged in homosexual actions yesterday does not mean he *is* or *will be* gay tomorrow. While this man is no doubt correct that his past does not wholly determine what he is, he cannot escape it. His facticity is constitutive of his being. This is precisely why his entire existence is determined by a feeling of guilt—he attempts to hide from how he appears to himself from the outside, to flee the

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[4] As Peter Thiel noted, "when [Trump supporters] hear things like the Muslim comment or the wall comment or things like that, the question is not 'Are you going to build a wall like the Great Wall of China?' or, you know, 'How exactly are you going to enforce these tests?' What they hear is 'We're going to have a saner, more sensible immigration policy.' 'We're going to try to figure out how do we strike the right balance between costs and benefits'" (Yarow).

[5] For example, one Trump supporter noted in June 2016, "I think it's symbolic. I mean, a physical wall? It's just such a strong vision and idea, but I just care about the border being secure" (Johnson). Another claimed, "[A]s I got to listen a little closer and realize the gist of what he was saying. What would you say as a nonpolitician? You'd say, 'Let's bomb the bastards.' Right? It's not like he's going to, but he says it to let people know he means business" (Todd and Zito 92).

inescapable gaze of the other. In other words, although he knows he has an open future he denies that he sees himself as already seen by another; he denies that the gaze of the other also determines his existence along with his transcendence. To be authentic, this person would have to own up to his past, come to terms with the fact that engaging in his previous actions is precisely what it means to be homosexual. That is, he must acknowledge that he is, and always will be, both what he is for himself and what he is for others.

Hillary Clinton appeared to deceive herself in just this way. As noted above, Hillary had always been perceived as a hypocrite, but her hypocrisy was not necessarily deemed a disqualifying feature of her political persona. Often it was considered a positive feature—she had experience navigating the world of power politics, of playing the game and coming out on top, and would thus excel in a leadership role. However, in 2016, Hillary Clinton seemed to deceive herself regarding her own hypocrisy despite all evidence to the contrary. This apparent denial of who she had always been made her hypocrisy seem worse than it was before. Was she trying to fool us or was she lying to herself? Concluding her account of the "corrupted forms" of the two ideal forms of hypocrisy in modern politics, Ruth Grant writes, "Precisely because these [corrupted] forms of hypocrisy are *unselfconscious*, they are more common, more dangerous, and more culpable than the conscious manipulations of the cynical political con man" (172). Accordingly, a self-deceived Hillary Clinton appears more culpable than a lying Donald Trump.

But how did this happen to Hillary Clinton? As David Runciman wrote of Clinton in 2008, "[Hillary Clinton's] public persona is too obviously an artificial construct…But [this] means that there is less danger in her case than there was in her husband's of becoming self-deceived. With Hillary Clinton there seems little possibility that she, any more than anyone else, will lose sight of the fact that she is a hypocrite" (215). So, how did she, an obvious hypocrite, appear to deceive herself about her own hypocrisy? Runciman is prescient here. He draws a distinction between a first and second order hypocrite, "between those whose hypocrisy is bounded by an understanding that hypocrisy is unavoidable and those whose hypocrisy has tipped over into self-deception. He claims a recurring problem in modern politics involves a first-order hypocrite accusing another of being a worse hypocrite than they, in effect saying, "'well, at least I'm not as hypocritical as you." After which, he claims, the first-order hypocrite "threatens to tip over into its own kind of self-deception," as they are left open to the reply, "'Well, you are if you really believe that' (and, of course, if you don't really believe it, then you're a hypocrite too)" (200). Accordingly, Hillary's hypocrisy appeared worse than before because she accused Trump of hypocrisy. By doing so she looked self-deceived regarding her own hypocrisy: were we supposed to believe that she did not think she too was a hypocrite? What about her past, about all the evidence that overwhelmingly suggests she is a hypocrite? Was she in denial about herself? In this way, a suspicious glance was turned in her direction and made him seem less guilty.

While Runciman's insight seems correct, it must be supplemented by laying bear the precise ways in which Trump benefited from her accusations. In some cases, for instance, Clinton's accusations made her appear self-deceived about her own hypocrisy because she highlighted a failure on her part to address issues about which she professes to care. For example, Clinton accused Trump of using Chinese steel in his construction projects. The precise claim (to paraphrase): Trump talks about reviving American steel, putting American industry first, and being tough on China, but by using Chinese steel rather than American steel, it appears he does not really care about that which he claims to care, which is why he and his potential voters should be concerned about this. His reaction had two parts: first, he placed distance between him and his decision to order the steel, claiming his general contractors and engineers ordered the product because it was cheaper. Then, he placed the responsibility for those decisions on her, i.e., on years of inaction on the part of politicians. To paraphrase his reply: Yeah, I used Chinese steel because it was cheaper and available, just as any businessman in my position would because it cuts cost, but it should not be available to me or other American companies at cheaper rates, which means it is not my failure but a failure on the part of you and your husband, for example, to address this issue, and you are only now talking about it because of me. In other words, Clinton appeared to be a hypocrite while Trump, as a businessman, appeared to have insight into the ill effects of government policies for American manufacturing and be the only one talking about them. Similarly, Clinton accused Trump of claiming he would release his tax returns, but failing to do so, suggesting that his unwillingness to release his taxes was a sign he was afraid to show he made less than he claimed, gave less than he should, and/or did not pay anything in federal taxes (all of which are true). His reaction again had two parts: he placed distance between his decision not to release his taxes and his unwillingness to release them, claiming his lawyers advised him not to release his taxes while under audit, and then maintained that if he paid nothing in federal taxes (which we now know he basically did, paying only $750, it would make him smart because politicians, like her, would just squander the money anyway. His response made two implicit points that were picked up by his voters: 1) Trump knows and

takes advantage of all the loopholes and exemptions available to him, which any businessman would do; this is not his fault but a product of failed government policies to address these issues despite promises by politicians like Clinton to address them; 2) this makes him the perfect person to tackle these issues—"Nobody knows the system better than me; that is why I alone can fix it" (Jackson). We can clearly see how Runciman's insight plays out in both of these cases. Clinton accused Trump of hypocrisy and he deflected her accusations, which made her appear self-deceived about her own hypocrisy. Yet, these instances also show how her accusations and his reactions reflected positively on Trump's specific positionality; he appeared as one who must play by the rules and yet knows the rules are broken (the system is rigged), making him the perfect person to fix them. In other words, there appeared to be differences in policy position underlying her accusations, differences to which Clinton did not intend to draw attention nor want to avow.

    In many other cases, however, Trump did not seem to oppose Clinton's policies, but what she said about them. In these cases, Clinton seemed to misunderstand the import of her accusations; she thought she was accusing Trump of hypocrisy but instead appeared to accuse him of his unwillingness to be hypocritical. For example, Clinton accused Trump of being a bigot regarding his pledge to prevent Muslims from entering the country. Racism is not something one would typically avow, so the more accurate accusation was (to paraphrase): your pledge makes you appear racist, which you should be concerned about given you claim you are not racist, or more precisely, the least racist person anybody has ever met. Trump dismissed this accusation, maintaining his pledge was not racist (nor xenophobic) but a pragmatic promise to assure the safety of US citizens; Clinton then continued to attack his pledge as an example of his bigotry. But the underlying issue was not necessarily whether Trump was a racist, but that 1) everyone knew Clinton would not accept many more Syrian refugees into the US than Trump and 2) yet, she did not and could not say this. That is, she made a fundamental assumption that it is un-American to say what he said, but not un-American to do what he said he was willing to do. While espousing the need for a continuation of our vetting system, even a strengthening of it, she stopped short of saying she would keep out the refugees, instead she claimed America should, as a matter of our identity, lead the world in expressing our willingness to accept the most vulnerable refugees. In other words, she acknowledged most Americans did not want many Syrian refugees in the country, but also assumed we would be embarrassed about wanting to prevent them entry, so her position was to save us the embarrassment of doing what the majority of Americans wanted to do by denying she would do it. What she appeared to be outraged about then was not what Trump planned to do, but that he said what he planned to do, which did not (to many) reveal he was racist but that she was a hypocrite. Trump was faced with a choice, to avow the hypocrisy or avow the underlying desire most Americans seemed to have, viz., a desire to keep out Arabs. Trump avowed the latter and seemed to millions of Americans more truthful—a say it like I see it type of guy—whereas Clinton looked self-deceived about her own hypocrisy.

    By examining these specific cases and laying bear the precise ways in which Trump benefited from Clinton's accusations, we can clearly see how the liar appeared more truthful than the hypocrite in 2016: the hypocrite deceived herself and the liar revealed both the falsity of his claims and the truth of the situation. But we can also see how these cases are instances of a single mechanism—a Trumpian mechanism—at play in Trump's success over Clinton. The mechanism can be outlined as follows: 1) Clinton accused Trump of hypocrisy with the assumption that both he and potential voters would be concerned to see him exposed as a hypocrite; 2) he deflected the accusations, i.e., he reacted at odds with the way she assumed he would act given the scope of the accusation, e.g., with indifference; and yet, following his reaction, 3) she continued to attack him from the standpoint she assumed he should have. However, it is crucial to note that this mechanism did not merely work against Clinton, but against Trump's Republican primary opponents, academic critics, and most notably the mainstream media—in fact, many of Clinton's accusations were merely extensions of similar accusations made by the press— and the mechanism did not stop working in 2016 but continued to work well into his presidency. Case in point is Trump's (first) impeachment.[6]

    The fundamental charge that led to Trump's 2019 impeachment in the House and 2020 trial in the Senate was not simply that Trump engaged in a quid pro quo, a "this for that" with a foreign power, but that Trump's self-interest was served at the expense of US national interest. The legal case was compelling; that Trump both abused his power and obstructed Congress. However, to make their case, the House Democrats, most notably Adam Schiff (D-CA), moved away from a strictly legal argument to

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[6] Due to time requirements, this article does not address Trump's second impeachment and the events following the election of Biden, viz., Trump's refusal to concede, accusations of wide-spread election fraud, and the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. All of which will be taken up in subsequent work.

take a public appeal position. Rather than simply making the case that Trump pressured a foreign power to intervene in our elections, a violation of FEC 52 USC 30121 Subsec. (a). Pub. L. 107–155, §303(2),[7] and then obstructed Congress to hide this fact, they felt compelled to stress the critical importance that the quid pro quo involved Ukraine in particular. Making such a case distracted attention away from and effectively undermined the legal arguments by pushing Democrats to defend a position they would not typically avow, viz., a John Bolton view of national security. In other words, to make their legal case the Democrats did not need to argue why the aid to Ukraine was in our national interests, because a sitting president who pressures a foreign country (regardless of the country) to intervene in our election for his benefit is manifestly not acting in the interest of a democratic and sovereign people. Yet, the Democrats felt compelled to argue that Trump not only prioritized his personal interests over our national interests but threatened our national security by withholding aid to Ukraine. They argued this point by stressing how Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine was an immediate threat to US national security.[8] The mechanism was clearly at play here: 1) Democrats assumed Trump (and/or his supporters) held a Cold War conception of politics, i.e., they believed Trump and his allies would be concerned if he were exposed as a hypocrite over the threat Russia poses to our national security; 2) Trump expressed indifference to their accusations, claiming the call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was perfect, that he is extremely tough on Russia, and referring to the impeachment as a witch-hunt; 3) the Democrats then continued to attack him from the position they assumed he should have, a non-hypocritical Cold-Warrior position. This is not traditionally a position Democrats would openly assert nor one they necessarily believe—in fact, they profess to believe in a humanitarian conception of politics, precisely *the* conception of politics that comes after the Cold War conception. Yet, this is the position they endorsed during the impeachment, and the impeachment prosecution became a Democratic argument for reviving the Cold War.[9] Thus, by attempting to appear as unhypocritical Cold Warriors the Democrats exposed themselves as self-deceived hypocrites—or worse, dangerous self-deceived hypocrites, since the foreign policy position they defended could have disastrous implications for the US, e.g., a war with Russia. As a result, despite many Senate Republicans believing Trump to be lying about the alleged quid pro quo, they did not deem his behavior to rise to the level of an impeachable offense.[10]

 Identifying the mechanism at play in Trump's relations between him and his critics is crucial for understanding Trump's success. He succeeded not merely despite their continual accusations but because of them. But the question remains: how did Trump get the better of so many people? How, in other words, did the Trumpian mechanism work against his political opponents and critics? The answer, I think, rests upon an understanding of the mechanism as a defense mechanism. His critics did not actually attack Trump per se, but what object-relations theorists refer to as an inner object, i.e., a version of themselves they wished to disavow, a bad part of themselves that did not repress what they do. Essentially, they attacked an image of themselves they projected onto Trump. This last point deepens the import of their self-deception. It was not merely Sartrean bad-faith—that their belief of who they were for themselves motivated them to deny who they were for others—but such that they

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[7] "It shall be unlawful for a foreign national directly or through any other person to make any contribution of money or other thing of value, or to promise expressly or impliedly to make any such contribution, in connection with an election to any political office or in connection with any primary election, convention, or caucus held to select candidates for any political office; or for any person to solicit, accept, or receive any such contribution from a foreign national" (United States Code).

[8] During the final day of the prosecution's opening arguments in the Senate trial Rep. Val Demings (D-FL) puts the position thusly: "[Trump] jeopardized our national security because Ukraine's national security is our national security" (PBS NewsHour).

[9] As David Bromwich insightfully noticed, "the Democrats are stumbling in the dark and not finding a solid footing. They went to absurd lengths in hitching their opposition to Trump to the rising pressure in the policy elite for a new cold war; and there was something deluded in the claim, made by the lead manager of the impeachment, Adam Schiff, that Ukrainians 'are fighting *our fight*' against Russia" (Bromwich).

[10] As Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH) said in a statement following the vote to call witnesses in the Senate trial: "I believe that some of the president's actions in this case—asking a foreign country to investigate a potential political opponent and the delay of aid to Ukraine—were wrong and inappropriate… [But] I do not believe the president's actions rise to the level of removing a duly-elected president from office and taking him off the ballot in the middle of an election" (Baird). And Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) tweeted, "There is no need for more evidence to conclude that the president withheld United States aid, at least in part, to pressure Ukraine to investigate the Bidens; the House managers have proved this with what they call a 'mountain of overwhelming evidence'… The question then is not whether the United States Senate or the American people should decide what to do about what he did. I believe that the Constitution provides that the people should make that decision in the presidential election that begins in Iowa on Monday" (@SenAlexander).

mistakenly believed they were attacking Trump when they were actually living out (masochistically) the unconscious fantasy of discrediting a bad version of themselves. This unconscious self-deception enabled Trump, the external object, to engage in an ideology critique of what they said about what they do, and to avow or disavow their deeds rather than their ideology.

Identifying this mechanism also enables us to better understand why, in early March 2020, there was a sudden convergence of Trump's political opponents around the idea that Joe Biden was the anti-Trump. In the primaries, Democrats were toying with the idea that Elisabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, or Pete Buttigieg would finally expose the truth about Trump on the debate stage; that one of these candidates would be the best person to publicly discredit and humiliate Trump (i.e., their bad self) by showing him to be a hypocrite rather than a liar. In effect, the bulk of the primary season was simply a search for the perfect candidate about whom Democrats could indulge their fantasy. The sudden convergence around Biden amounted to an abandonment of that fantasy. That is, in early March, Trump's opponents reconciled themselves to the idea that no one was going to expose Trump for what he truly is and make him look bad, and that attempting to do so would only make them look worse. In my terminology, his opponents implicitly acknowledged the power of the Trumpian mechanism and thereby shed their fantasy. They obviously knew an inarticulate and gaff prone Biden would not discredit Trump on the debate stage. But more importantly, they also knew he would not try. In fact, although Biden's campaign did not use this language, their strategy was simply to show Biden as immune to the Trumpian mechanism; to show he was simply a good man who would never project positions (or his bad self) onto Trump in an attempt to expose Trump as a hypocrite. In this way, Biden was understood to resist (or perhaps pre-exist)[11] the operation of the mechanism, and this would benefit he and he alone in the general election.

The rise of Covid-19 only made Biden's (immunity) strategy easier as he competed in only two debates, made minimal public appearances, and remained at his home in Delaware the bulk of the campaign season. But, although his immunity to the mechanism was an essential part of his strategy, it was not all of it. Another important component involved Biden benefiting from the mechanism turning against Trump. In other words, the mechanism not only helps explain how Trump won in 2016, because the mechanism worked against his opponents, it also helps explain how he lost in 2020, because it was used against him.

In late February, leading Democrats, such as Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi, began attacking Trump over his handling of the virus, e.g., not asking for more money, not distributing enough tests kits, appointing an immigration hawk with no experience in public health to the coronavirus task force, preventing the US from being better prepared for an epidemic by previously slashing CDC funding by 16%, not having a coordinated federal response, and waiting too long to call for any funding ("too little, too late"). Rather than take his opponents' criticisms at face value, that they were genuinely concerned about preventing the spread of a deadly disease, he assumed they were merely politicizing the virus for political gain. As Trump stated on February 26th, "We should all be working together. She [Pelosi] is trying to create panic, and there's no reason to panic because we have done so good… She knows; all they're trying to do is gain a political advantage. This isn't about a political advantage" (Tbilisi).[12] The mechanism worked as follows: 1) he assumed his opponents did not ultimately care about the threat the virus posed to US citizens, that they were simply interested in politicizing the virus for political gain; 2) the Democrats disavowed this position;[13] and then 3) Trump began attacking them from the position he assumed they had. By early March, he was actively politicizing the virus, proceeding to downplay its devastating potential and engaging in continued attacks against his political opponents and the mainstream media for politicizing the virus. In other words, Trump appeared to be hypocritical by accusing his political opponents of politicizing the virus while transparently politicizing the virus. Meanwhile, Biden remained relatively silent, enabling the mechanism to work in his favor.

So, given the fact that the mechanism was not only working against Trump, making him look hypocritical with respect to the virus, and that Trump was competing against an opponent seemingly

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[11] Although Biden is roughly contemporary with the Clinton Democrats, he is a bit older and identifies himself as a Kennedy Democrat rather than a Clinton Democrat.

[12] He put the point more polemically on Twitter, "Low Ratings Fake News MSDNC (Comcast) & @CNN are doing everything possible to make the Caronavirus [sic] look as bad as possible, including panicking markets, if possible. Likewise their incompetent Do Nothing Democrat comrades are all talk, no action. USA in great shape! @CDCgov;" and "Democrats talking point is that we are doing badly. If the virus disappeared tomorrow, they would say we did a really poor, and even incompetent, job. Not fair, but it is what it is. So far, by the way, we have not had one death. Let's keep it that way!".

[13] Pelosi stated, "Lives are at stake… this is not the time for name-calling and playing politics" (Quinn).

immune to the mechanism, one would expect him to have lost in a landslide in the general election. This was precisely the prediction of most Democrats, e.g., Nancy Pelosi, who assured us that Trump and Trumpism would be thoroughly repudiated following the results of the election. However, Trump was not repudiated. He won over 12 million more votes than he did in 2016, ten million more than Clinton, receiving the second highest vote count of any candidate in US history. As such, although Biden won the election by seven million votes, the view that Trump would be utterly discredited because of his response to Covid-19 proved to be a fantasy. So, how did Trump avoid repudiation over his (mis)handling of the virus? Simply put, the mechanism was working in two directions; along with working against Trump, it was also working against his opponents.

Following the passage of the $2.2 trillion CARES Act in late March 2020, which put $1200 directly in the pockets of each American citizen, the Democrats began working on a second relief package. In May, House Democrats passed the $3.4 trillion HEROES Act, which contained an additional $1200 in direct payments to citizens. Democrats knew the HEROES Act would never pass in the Republican controlled Senate. Instead, it was meant to serve, they claimed, as a starting point for negotiations with Senate Republicans and the White House over the next round of economic relief. But did the HEROES Act demonstrate the seriousness with which Democrats viewed the pandemic, or rather, did it demonstrate their hypocrisy?

The HEROES Act was immediately blasted by both Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, who called it a "$3 trillion left-wing wish list," and President Trump (McConnell). Negotiations stalled. In July, McConnell countered with the $1 trillion HEALS Act, which included another round of $1200 relief checks. Democrats refused to compromise; Pelosi tweeted, "Republicans refused to take action to feed hungry children nationwide," and accused them of hypocrisy (@SpeakerPelosi). Democrats then countered with another version of the HEROES Act, this time a $2.2 trillion aid package. Trump issued a few press briefings in early August claiming he was willing to sign a relief package but that the Democrats were holding relief hostage because of their unwillingness to compromise on certain provisions, such as a high bar for state and local funding. Negotiations stalled again. Trump and Steve Mnuchin then countered with a $1.8 trillion proposal on Oct. 9th, again with $1200 in direct payments. Progressive Democrats like Ro Khanna implored Pelosi to take the deal, but Pelosi refused to budge, issuing a statement on Oct. 10th, "When the President talks about wanting a bigger relief package, his proposal appears to mean that he wants money at his discretion to grant or withhold, rather than agreeing on language prescribing how we honor our workers, crush the virus and put money in the pockets of workers" (Pelosi). When CNN host Wolf Blitzer pushed Pelosi (on air) as to why she refused to take the deal, she claimed "I don't know why you're always an apologist, and many of your colleagues, apologists for the Republican position." Blitzer then asked her to look Americans in the eye and explain why she was refusing the deal. She claimed, "I hope you'll ask the same question of the Republicans on why they don't want to meet the needs of the American people" (Speaker Nancy Pelosi). In other words, Pelosi accused Trump and other Republicans of hypocrisy while simultaneously refusing to compromise on a stimulus package, thereby looking like a hypocrite. Why was she refusing to make a deal? Did she want to prevent Trump from passing a relief package prior to the election, in effect denying Trump a political win before Election Day? Many Americans were asking this very question. The deal struck merely a month after the election only gave credence to their rising suspicions. Following the election, Pelosi and fellow Democrats celebrated, as a great victory, the passage of a $900 billion relief package that only contained $600 in direct payments to citizens and lacked the bulk of state and local funding they deemed necessary during earlier negotiations. Matt Taibbi writes,

> Remember all of that state and local funding that Democrats insisted was so crucial to the aid package? Today, the state and local aid package signed off on by [Democrats] Manchin and Warner is down to $160 billion, appropriated as part of a separate bill… with the main $748 billion plan. In other words, Democrats just agreed to take seven times less than the $1.13 trillion they asked for in the HEROES Act, and about half of Mnuchin's $300 billion offer in October that Pelosi rejected as "sadly inadequate." As for that $748 billion Bill? According to the senior Democratic aide, who pointed to comments made by Mitt Romney, it includes $540 billion in offsets, "repurposed from March's CARES Act." In other words, the aide says, "The $748 billion deal is really just $188 billion in new money." Given all the high-flown rhetoric the Party devoted before Election Day to rejecting aid packages they deemed heartlessly small, the hypocrisy, he says, is "amazing." If you include the $160 billion package for state and local aid, the new deal offers a maximum of $348 billion in new money, well below some of the better offers they received from Republicans over the summer and fall.

In other words, during the months leading up to Election Day, the Democrats appeared to many Americans as if they were prioritizing politics over the well-being of American citizens. Regardless of whether Trump took the virus seriously, he took the economy seriously, and most Americans would

have welcomed another round of $1200 in direct payments. In fact, many (especially in Trump's base) would have been better off with such checks then they would have been had there been no pandemic at all. So, by refusing to compromise on a deal, Democrats appeared to be hypocritical regarding the virus; they seemed to care more about denying Trump a political win prior to the election, a win that could only increase his chances of reelection, than they did about curbing the economic impact of the pandemic. Therefore, since the mechanism was both working against Trump and for him (by working against his Democrat opponents), Trump was not discredited in the 2020 election. But, because Biden showed himself to be relatively immune to the mechanism, Trump lost, and Biden won the presidency.

I do not mean to suggest, by any means, that the Trumpian mechanism explains all there is to Trump. It does, however, explain the depth to which Trump's critics (and thus much of the literature on Trump) are blind to the Trump phenomenon. Since, for them, Trump is an inner object, they are both blind to the object of their rebuke and to their own role in Trump's success. But this leaves us with the following question: How can we come to understand and critically engage Trump and Trumpism without thereby attacking a projection of our bad selves and enabling the Trumpian mechanism from working against us? Highlighting the importance of the mechanism can be instructive here not simply because it illustrates how Trump wrongfooted his opponents and how he was wrongfooted by them, but because it enables us to deepen our understanding of both him and his positions in regard to his opponents. For one, because his opponents projected particular positions onto Trump, we can better understand their positions, viz., the ideologies that have been hegemonic of American political discourse and the truth underlying these ideologies. Trump seemingly targets these ideologies, so we can then situate Trump's positions in relation to them. Secondly, attending to Trump's reactions to his opponents' accusations enables us to better understand his positions. For example, rather than understand his indifference to particular accusations as a failing of Trump, we can understand it as a positive feature of his position. Thirdly, the mechanism is also useful precisely because it was turned against Trump. Why, e.g., when the pandemic hit the US, was Trump unable to do the thing that would have guaranteed him reelection, viz., declare war on the virus and politicize the fact that he was not politicizing the virus while daring his opponents to do so? Why didn't he declare martial law and demonstrate the virtues of his policies? He was the one who claimed stronger borders made us safe, so why was he unable to demonstrate that by immediately shutting down travel, immigration, and commerce from other countries? In other words, there must be something about the social forces he represents or beliefs he holds that prevented him from doing this. Attending to the positions he projects onto his opponents will help us better understand what these are. In sum, basing an analysis of Trump and Trumpism on the specific operation of the mechanism enables a more forceful and accurate understanding of the Trump phenomenon, one that does not simply perpetuate the power of the object it wishes to critique.

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